The VALIANTS of VIRGINIA

By HALLIE ERMINIE RIVES (MRS. POST WHEELER)

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—John Valiant, a rich society favorite, suddenly discovers that the Valiant corporation, which his father founded and which was the principal source of his wealth, has failed.

CHAPTER II—He voluntarily turns over his private fortune to the receiver for the corporation.

CHAPTER III—His entire remaining possessions consist of an old motor car, a white bull dog and Damory court, a neglected estate in Virginia.

CHAPTER IV—He learns that this estate came into the family by royal grant and has been in the possession of the Valiants ever since.

CHAPTER V—On the way to Damory court he meets Shirley Dandridge, an auburn-haired beauty, and decides that he is going to like Virginia immensely.

CHAPTER VI—An old negro tells Shirley's fortune and predicts great trouble for her on account of a man.

CHAPTER VII—Uncle Jefferson, an old negro, takes Valiant to Damory court.

CHAPTER VIII—Shirley's mother, Mrs. Dandridge, and Major Bristow exchange reminiscences during which it is revealed that the major, Valiant's father, and a man named Sassoon, were rivals for the hand of Mrs. Dandridge in her youth. Sassoon and Valiant fought a duel on her account in which the former was killed.

CHAPTER IX—Valiant finds Damory court overgrown with weeds and creepers and the buildings in a very much neglected condition. Uncle Jefferson and his wife, Aunt Daphne, are engaged as servants.

CHAPTER X—Valiant explores his ancestral home. He is surprised by a fox hunting party which invades his estate. He recognizes Shirley at the head of the party.

Just then from the rear of the house came a strident voice:

"Yo', Raph'el! Take yo' han's outer dem cherries! Don' yo' know of yo' swallahs dem ar pits, yo' gwineter hab 'pendegeetus en lump up en die?"

The sound of a slap and shrill yelp followed, and around the porch dashed an infantile darkey, as nude as a black Puck, with his hands full of cherries, who came to a sudden demoralized stop in the embarrassing foreground.

"Ralph!" thundered the doctor. "Didn't I tell you to go back to that kitchen?"

"Yes, suh," responded the imp. "But yo' didn' tell me ter stay dar!"

"If I see you out here again," roared the doctor, I'll tie your ears back—and grease you—and SWALLOW you!" At which grisly threat, the apparition, with a shrill shriek, turned and ran desperately for the corner of the house.

"I hear," said the doctor, resuming, "that the young man who came to fix the place up has hired Uncle Jefferson and his wife to help him. Who's responsible for that interesting information?"

"Rickey Snyder," said Mrs. Mason. "She's got a spy-glass rigged up in a sugar-tree at Miss Mattie Sue's and she saw them pottering around there this morning."

"Little limb!" exclaimed Mrs. Gifford, with emphasis. "She's as cheeky as a town-hog. I can't imagine what Shirley Dandridge was thinking of when she brought that low-born child out of her sphere."

Something like a growl came from the doctor as he struck open the screen-door. "'Limb!' I'll bet ten dollars she's an angel in a cedar-tree at a church fair compared with some better-born young ones I know of who are only fit to live when they've got the scarlet-fever and who ought to be in the reformatory long ago. And as for Shirley Dandridge, it's my opinion she and her mother and a few others like her have got about the only drops of the milk of human kindness in this whole abandoned community!"

"Dreadful man!" said Mrs. Gifford, sotto voce, as the door banged viciously. "To think of his being born a Southall! Sometimes I can't believe it!"

Mrs. Mason shook her head and smiled. "Ah, but that isn't the real Doctor Southall," she said. "That's only his shell."

"I've heard that he has another side," responded the other with guarded grimness, "but if he has, I wish he'd manage to show it sometimes."

Mrs. Mason took off her glasses and wiped them carefully. "I saw it when my husband died," she said softly. "That was before you came. They were old friends, you know. He was sick almost a year, and the doctor used to carry him out here on the porch every day in his arms, like a child. And then, when the typhus came that summer among the negroes, he quarantined himself with them—the only white man there—and treated and nursed them and buried the dead with his own hands, till it was stamped out. That's the real Doctor Southall."

The rockers vibrated in silence for a moment. Then Mrs. Gifford said: "I never knew before that he had anything to do with that duel. Was he one of Valiant's seconds?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Mason; "and the major was the other. I was a little girl when it happened. I can barely remember it, but it made a big sensation."

"And over a love-affair!" exclaimed Mrs. Gifford in the tone of one to whom romance was daily bread.

"I suppose it was."

For a time the conversation languished. Then Mrs. Gifford asked suddenly: "Who do you suppose she could have been?—the girl behind that old Valiant affair."

Mrs. Mason shook her head. "No one knows for certain—unless, of course, the major or the doctor, and I wouldn't question either of them for worlds. You see, people had stopped gossiping about it before I was out of school. There's Major Bristow at the gate now. And the doctor's just coming out again."

The major wore a suit of white linen, with a broad-brimmed straw hat, and a pink was in his buttonhole, but to the observing, his step might have seemed to lack an accustomed jauntiness. As he came up the path the doctor opened his office. "How do you feel this morning, Major."

"Feel?" rumbled the major; "the way any gentleman ought to feel this time of the morning, sah. Like hell, sah."

The doctor bent his gaze on the hilarious blossom in the other's lapel. "If I were you, Bristow," he said scathingly, "I reckon I'd quit galivanting around to bridge-fights with perfumery on my handkerchief every evening. It's the devil of an example to the young."

The rocking-chairs behind the screening vines became motionless, and the ladies exchanged surreptitious smiles. If the two gentlemen were aware of each other's sterling qualities, their mutual appreciation was in inverse ratio to its expression, and, as the Elucinian mysteries, cloaked before the world. In public the doctor was wont to remark that the major talked like a Caesar, looked like a piano-tuner and was the only man he had ever seen who could strut sitting down. Never were his gibes so barbed as when launched against the major's white-waistcoated and patrician calm, and conversely, never did the major's bland suavity so nearly approach an undignified irritation as when receiving the envenomed darts of that accomplished cynic.

The major settled his black tie. "A little wholesome exercise wouldn't be a bad thing for you, Doctor," he said succinctly. "You're looking a shade pasty today."

"Exercise!" snapped the other viciously, as he pounded down the steps. "Ha, ha! I suppose you exercise—lazying out to the Dandridges once a week for a julep, and the rest of the time wearing out good cane-bottoms and palm-leaf fans and cussing at the heat. You'll go off with apoplexy one of these days."

"I shall if they're scared enough to call you," the major shot after him, nettled. But the doctor did not pause. He went on down the street without turning his head.

The major lifted his hat gallantly to the ladies, whose presence he had just observed.

"Do sit down, Major," said Mrs. Gifford. "There's a question I'm just dying to ask you. We've had such an interesting conversation. You've heard the news, of course, that young Mr. Valiant is coming to Damory Court?"

The major sat down heavily. In the bright light his face seemed suddenly pale and old.

"No?" the lady's tone was arch. "Have all the rest of us really got ahead of you for once? Yes, it's true. There's some one there getting it to rights. Now here's the question. There was a woman, of course, at the bottom of the Valiant duel. I'd never dream of asking you who she was. But which was it she loved, Valiant or Sassoon?"

CHAPTER XII.

The Echo.

When the major entered his room, Jereboam, his ancient body-servant, was dawdling about putting things to rights, his seamed visage under his white wool suggesting a charred stump beneath a crisp powdering of snow. "Jedge Chalmahs done telly-foam ter ax yo' ovah ter Glahden Hall ter suppah ter-night, suh," he said.

"Tell him not tonight, Jerry," said the other wearily. "Some other time."

The old darky ruminated as he plodded down to the doctor's telephone. "Whut de mattah now? He got dat ar way-off-yondah look ergen." He shook his head forebodingly.

The major had, indeed, a far-away look as he sat there, a heavy lonely figure, that bright morning. It had slipped to his face with the news of the arrival at Damory Court. He told himself that he felt queer.

Suddenly he seemed to hear elfin voices close to his ear:

"Which was it she loved? Valiant or Sassoon?"

It was so distinct that he started, vexed and disturbed. Really, it was absurd. He would be seeing things next! "Southall may be right about that exercise," he muttered; "I'll walk more." He began the projected reform without delay, striding up and down the room. But the little voices presently sounded again, shouting like gnomes inside a hill:

"Which was it? Valiant or Sassoon?"

"I wish to God I knew!" said the major roughly, standing still. It silenced them, but the sound of his own voice, as though it had been a preconcerted signal, drew together a hundred inchoate images of other days. There was the well-ordered garden of Damory Court—it rose up, gloomy with night shadows, across his great clothes-press against the wall—with himself sitting on a rustic-bench smoking and behind him the candle-lighted library window with Beauty Valiant pacing up and down, waiting for daylight. There was a sun-lighted stretch between two hemlocks, with Southall and he measuring the ground—the grass all dewy sparkles and an early robin teetering on a thorn-bush. Eight — nine — ten — he caught himself counting the paces.

He wiped his forehead. Between the hemlocks now were two figures facing each other, one twitching uncertainly, the other palely rigid; and at one side, held screen-wise, a raised umbrella. In some ghostly way he could see right through the latter—see the doctor's hand gripping the handle, his own, outstretched beyond its edge, holding a handkerchief ready to flutter down. A silly subterfuge those umbrellas, but there must be no actual witnesses to the final act of a "gentlemen's meeting"! A silly code the whole of it, now happily outgrown! The scene blurred into a single figure huddling down—huddling down—

"Which did she love?" The major shook his head helplessly. It was, after all, only the echo, become all at once audible on a shallow woman's lips, of a question that had always haunted him. It had first come to him on the heels of that duel, when he had stood, somewhat later that hateful morning, holding a saddled horse before the big pillared porch. It had whispered itself then from every moving leaf. "Sassoon or Valiant?" If she had loved Sassoon, of what use the letter Valiant was so long penning in the library? But—if it were Valiant she loved? The man who, having sworn not to lift his hand against the other, had broken his sacred word to her! Who had stained the unwritten code by facing an opponent maddened with liquor! Yet, what was there a woman might not condone in the one man? Would she read, forgive and send for him?

The major laughed out suddenly, harshly, in the quiet room, and looked down as if he expected to see that letter still lying in his hand. But the laugh could not still a regular pulsing sound that was in his ears—elfin like the voices, but as distinct—the sound of a horse's hoofs going from Damory Court.

He had heard those hoof-beats echo in his brain for thirty years!

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Till the sun was high John Valiant lay on his back in the fragrant grass, meditatively watching a bucaneering chicken-hawk draw widening circles against the blue and listening to the vibrant tattoo of a "pecker-wood" on a far-away tree, and the timorous wet whistle of a bob-white. The whole place was very quiet now. For just one thrilling moment it had burgeoned into sound and movement: when the sweaty horses had stood snorting and stamping in the yard with the hounds scampering between their legs and the riding-coats winking like rubies in the early sunshine!

Had she recognized him as the smudged tinkerer of the stalled car? "She saw me drop that wretched brute through the window," he chuckled. "I could take oath to that. But she didn't give me away, true little sport that she was. And she won't. I can't think of any reason, but I know. Was she angry? I wonder!"

At length he rose and went back to the house. With a bunch of keys he had found he went to the stables, after some difficulty gained access, and propped the crazy doors and windows open to the sun. The building was airy and well-lighted and contained a dozen roomy box-stalls, a spacious loft and a carriage-house. The straw bedding had been unremoved, mice-gnawed sacking and rotted hay lay in the mangers, and the warped harness, hanging on its pegs, was a smelly mass of mildew and decay. He found a stick, mowed away the festooning cobwebs, and moved the debris piece-meal.

"There!" he said with satisfaction. "There's a place for the motor—if Uncle Jefferson ever gets it here."

It was noon when he returned, after a wash-up in the lake, to the meal with which Aunt Daphne, in a costume dimly suggestive of a bran-meal poultice with a gingham apron on, regaled him. Fried chicken, corn-bread so soft and fluffy that it had to be lifted from the pan with a spoon, browned potatoes, and to his surprise, fresh milk. "Ah done druv ouah ol' cow ovah, suh," explained Aunt Daphne. "'Case she gotter be milked, er she run dry ez de Red Sea fo' de chillon ob Izril."

"Aunt Daphne," inquired Valiant with his mouth full, "what do you call this green thing?"

"Dat? Dat's jes' turnip-tops, suh, wid er hunk er bacon in de pot. Lawser-me, et cer'n'y do me good ter see yo' git arter it dat way, suh. Reck'n yo' got er appertite! Hyuh, Hyuh!"

"I have. I never guessed it before, and it's a magnificent discovery. However, it suggests unwelcome reflections. Aunt Daphne, how long do you estimate a man can dine like this on—well, say on a hundred dollars?"

"Er hun'ed dollahs, suh? Dat's er right smart heap o' money, deed et is! Well suh, 'pen's on whut yo' raises. Ef yo' raises yo' own gyarden-sass en chick'ns en aigs, Ah reck'n yo' kin live longah dan dat ar Methoosalum, en still haf mos' of it in de ol' stockin'."

"Ah! I can grow all those things myself, you think?"

"Yo' cert'n'y kin," said Aunt Daphne. "Ev'ybody do. De chick'ns done peck fo' deyselves en de yuddah things—yo' o'ny gotter 'courage 'em en dey jes' grows."

Valiant ate his dessert with a thoughtful smile wrinkling his brow. As he pushed back his chair he smote his hands together and laughed aloud. "Back to the soil!" he said. "John Valiant, farmer! The miracle of it is that it sounds good to me. I want to raise my own grub and till my own soil. I want to be my own man! And I'm beginning to see my way. Crops will have to wait for another season, but there's water and pasture for cattle now. There's timber—lots of it—on that hillside, too. I must look into that."

He filled his pipe and climbed the staircase to the upper floor. There were many bedrooms with great four-posted, canopied beds and old-fashioned carved furniture of mahogany and curly-maple, and in one he found a great cedar-lined chest filled with bed-linen and napery. In these rooms were more evidences of decay. The bedroom he mentally chose for his own was the plainest of all, and was above the library, fronting the vagabond garden. It had a great black desk with many glass-knobbed drawers and a book-rack.

He lingered longest in a room whose door was painted The Hilarium. It had evidently been a nursery and schoolroom. Here on the walls were many shelves wound over with networks of cobwebs, and piled with the oddest assemblage of toys. There were school-books, too, thumbed and dog-eared, from First Reader to Caesar's Gallic Wars, with names of small Valiants scrawled on their fly-leaves. He carefully relocked the door of this room; he wanted to dust those toys and books with his own hands.

In the upper hall again he leaned from the window, sniffing the far-flung scent of orchards and peach-blown fence-rows. The soft whirring sound of a bird's wing went past, almost brushing his startled face, and the old oaks seemed to stretch their bent limbs with a faithful brute-like yawn of pleasure. In the room below he could hear the vigorous sound of Aunt Daphne's hard-driven broom and the sound flooded the echoing space with a comfortable commotion.

He went to his trunk and fished out a soft shirt on which he knotted a loose tie, exchanged his Panama for a slouch hat, and whistling the barcarole from Tales of Hoffmann, went gaily out. "I feel tremendously alive today," he confided to the dog, as he tramped through the lush grass. "If you see me ladle the muck out of that fountain with my own fair hands, don't have a fit. I'm liable to do anything."

His eye swept up and down the slope. "There probably isn't a finer site for a house in the whole South," he told himself. "The living-rooms front south and west. We'll get scrumptious sunsets from that back porch. And on the other side there's the view clear to the Blue Ridge."

He skirted the lake. "Only to grub out some of the lilies—there's too many of them—and straighten the rim—and weed the pebble margin to give those green rocks a show. I'll build a little wharf below them to dive from, and—yes, I'll stock it with spotted trout."

He was but a few hundred yards from the house, yet the silence was so deep that there might have been no habitation within fifty miles. All at once he stopped short; there was a sudden movement in the thicket beyond—the sound of light fast footfalls, as of some one running away.

He made a lunge for the dog, but with a growl Chum tore himself from the restraining grasp and dashed into the bushes. "A child, no doubt," he thought as he plunged in pursuit, "and that lubberly brute will scare it half to death!"

He pulled up with an exclamation. In a narrow wood-path a little way from him, partly hidden by a windfall, stood a girl, her skirt transfixed with a wickedly jagged sapling. He saw instantly how it had happened; the windfall had blocked the way, and she had sprung clear over it, not noting the screened spear, which now held her as effectually as any railroad spike.

In another moment Valiant had reached her and met her face, flushed, half defiant, her eyes a blue gleam of smoldering anger as she desperately, almost savagely, thrust wild tendrils of flame-colored hair beneath the broad curved brim of her straw hat. At her feet lay a great armful of cape jessamines.

A little thrill, light and warm and joyous, ran through him. Until that instant he had not recognized her.

(Continued Next Week.)

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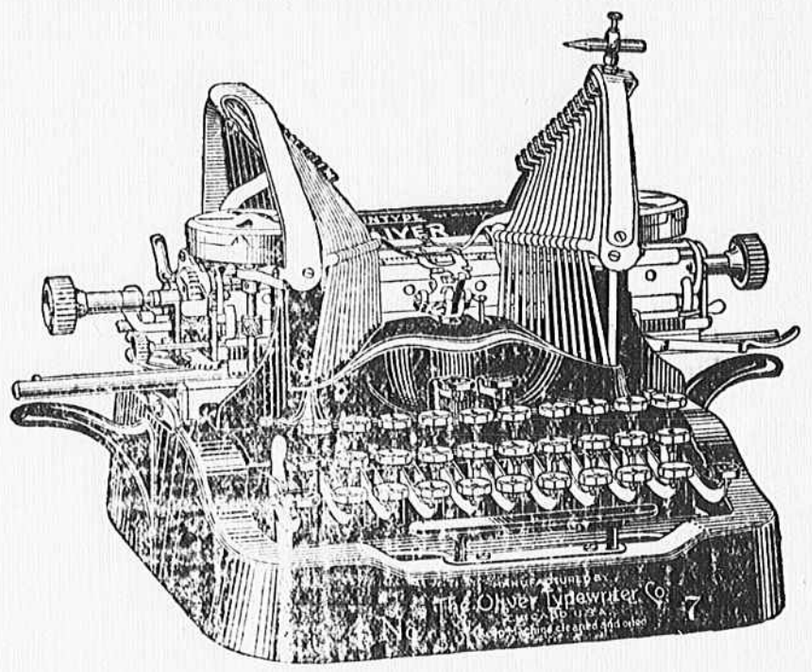

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